



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time A



“The Teacher” by Hans Thoma 1835-1924



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Dear Jesus,

Help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go.

Flood my soul with your spirit and life.

Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of you.

Shine through me,

And be so in me that every soul I come into contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.

Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus!

John Henry Cardinal Newman

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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LITURGICAL CONTEXT

- ▶ We still hear Jesus teaching us in the Great Sermon.
- ▶ Today Jesus teaches us how we must follow his example.
- ▶ We are to choose the way of non-violence and love.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

First reading: Leviticus 19:-12, 17-18

- ▶ People will come to know God as a result of the witness of God's people.
- ▶ Believers are to exude the holiness of God.
- ▶ Scholars have testified that Christianity itself spread throughout the known world because of the love that was shown by Christians toward one another and toward the living God. Leviticus exhorts believers to this kind of love and holiness.
- ▶ Thus, people fulfill the law of holiness by living according to the great law of love.
- ▶ For the Israelite, love of neighbor was to be extended to another Israelite.
- ▶ Jesus was far more expansive in his exhortation to love. He extended it to the entire world—Jew, Gentile, friend and enemy.
- ▶ The Book of Leviticus set forth the Holiness Code in which the people were instructed to be as holy as God was holy.
- ▶ God was in intimate, reciprocal, covenant relationship with his people.
- ▶ God was involved in their lives. Yes, God is transcendent and holy, but God was [and is] a viable living presence among them.
- ▶ God is reachable, touchable and knowable.
- ▶ God invites us to call him by his name—to share familiar intimacy with him.
- ▶ God takes the initiative to be in relationship with his children.
- ▶ God's people are called to emulate God's own holiness by loving one another.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What is the lesson in this reading? How could this possibly be a word for us today?

- ▶ Have you ever loved another person the way God loves you? Unconditionally?
- ▶ What are the obstacles in human life today that keep us from loving as God loves us?
- ▶ Have you ever been unconditionally loved as God loves his children?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about the holiness of God? What are the implications?
- ▶ If love is the barometer by which holiness is judged, describe the ways in which you are holy.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

- ▶ The Holy Spirit resides in the temple of God's people, the Church.
- ▶ Paul uses this metaphor for the first time in today's reading.
- ▶ Both the human person and the church experience the indwelling of God's Spirit.
- ▶ The Holy Spirit dwells within each person and for Paul that makes each person a temple of God.
- ▶ Paul's frustration is evident in his anger over discord and rivalries in the community.
- ▶ The people who believed themselves endowed with special knowledge—a special gnosis—acted as though they were superior to the other members of the community.
- ▶ This outraged Paul. Their wisdom was of this world—it was not God's wisdom.
- ▶ Paul insisted that the only wisdom that mattered was the wisdom gleaned from embracing the cross of Jesus Christ.
- ▶ Jesus saved the world through his sacrifice on the cross.
- ▶ Only through Christ are we saved. Christ is the foundation and cornerstone of the Christian community.
- ▶ Human leaders dare not boast of their greatness before God.
- ▶ Those who defile the temple of God by introducing human wisdom—the wisdom of the world—into the community are guilty of harming the very ground upon which the community is built.
- ▶ Christ is our sure anchor and it is he upon whom we must rely and from whom our wisdom flows.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group.

- ▶ In what way are the same concerns Paul expressed evident in the Christian community today?
- ▶ What is Paul's definition of wisdom?

- ▶ Paul insists that wisdom is gained through our participation in the cross of Christ. What does that mean to you?
- ▶ Have you ever encountered anyone who thought they were more spiritually gifted than others? If you have not personally known such a person, imagine knowing that person. What does that kind of attitude produce in a community?
- ▶ What should be your response in the face of such an attitude?
- ▶ What are the implications for each of us?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that you are a temple of God? What evidence is there in your life that you are that temple?

Gospel: Matthew 5: 38-48

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
 - ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
-
- ▶ Jesus' intention was not to abolish the law. His intention was to invite conversion of heart in relation to it—to remind people why the law was established in the first place.
 - ▶ Jesus was teaching his disciples a new way to live—a reorienting of life.
 - ▶ He offered a new way of responding to life's challenges and painful, hurt-filled situations.
 - ▶ Rather than revenge he offered a way of non-violence.
 - ▶ He challenged Christians to respond to injury in a non-violent, peace-filled manner.
 - ▶ Jesus was not suggesting that disciples embrace an emotional feeling of love for an enemy—that would be difficult to achieve in the best of circumstances.
 - ▶ He was, however, offering a new way of responding to the enemy—a positive way.
 - ▶ Rather than the customary *law of the talion* ("no more than what had been exacted could be asked in return," Word and Worship Workbook, Year A, 398), Jesus was suggesting a more positive, imaginative response from believers.
 - ▶ TURN THE OTHER CHEEK
 - ▶ Ancient Palestine was a shame based culture. Response to injury was borne out of that culture. Humiliation was to be avoided at all costs.
 - ▶ The left hand was used to care for bodily functions. Thus it was never to be used for eating and it was never to be extended to others.
 - ▶ A slap on the cheek required either a backhanded slap of the right hand or an open slap of the left hand. Such a slap was considered an affront.
 - ▶ A backhanded slap was the greater humiliation and resulted in a much higher damage award. A backhanded slap meant that the injured party could collect four times higher award. A fisted slug was worth one day's wage in damages. A slap on the face was worth two day's wage. A backhanded slap, however, was worth four day's wage in damages.
 - ▶ The *law of the talion* also called the *law of the tooth* required that a person could

only exact what was taken from him. A person could only take one tooth, not the whole head of teeth, or one eye and not both eyes in revenge for the offense. The law was intended as a system of checks and balances. A person could not ask more than what was lost in the injury. It was a just way of meting out damages for wrongdoing.

- ▶ Jesus turns the law on its end and says retaliation is out of the question altogether.
- ▶ Turning the other cheek was not reprisal. The person who turned the cheek was assuming their own power. They were in control of the situation. They cast aside fear and seized the moment by not allowing the aggressor to have the upper hand.
- ▶ The aggressor would have to decide whether to slap the person again. However, the second time it would be as an equal—not as a slave.
- ▶ Jesus was teaching his disciples that there is a better way to live and act in the world and violence is not the answer. Jesus' response respected the human dignity of the victim; it did not make him a punching bag for the aggressor. The victim is in charge of the situation and freely chooses to be slapped again—human to human—equal to equal.
- ▶ Revenge, retaliation, retribution and reprisal will not be tolerated in the kingdom of God.

TUNIC AND CLOAK

- ▶ Rather than encourage a passive response to legal situations as it would seem in the vignette in which Jesus is telling them that if someone is sued for their tunic they should offer their cloak as well, Jesus was inviting a clever response.
- ▶ A shame based culture would have been horrified by the presence of a person without tunic or cloak—in other words—a naked person—that the shame would have been upon the person who exacted the damages, not the person who was sued for his cloak and tunic.
- ▶ The plaintiff would have been coerced into giving him back his clothes to rectify the situation.
- ▶ The Romans pressed the citizens into service to carry their gear. Jesus suggested that rather than be subjugated by going only the one mile; disciples should exercise their own personal freedom by going two miles instead of one.

GIVING WITH NO EXPECTATION OF RECOMPENSE

- ▶ Very often the giver in the shame based culture was in a position of authority and power over the person to whom something was given. Such a person was often the patron and the receiver was the client.
- ▶ Strings were always attached to such giving. The recipient was expected to return the favor. It was often a showy act of power over the subjugated person.
- ▶ Jesus insisted that there should be no strings attached whatsoever. There should be no expectation of return.

THE LAND AND WEALTHY LANDOWNERS

- ▶ There was only so much land to go around. The only way a landowner increased his ownership of land was to quickly seize defaulted loans from poor peasant farmers.
- ▶ Jesus suggested that the peasants band together and help one another pay the loans and thus avoid default altogether.
- ▶ Jesus' non-violent approach was not intended as a subtle way to change the aggressors' actions or policies. It was also not intended as a discipline to enhance spiritual growth even though such growth was the likely result. Jesus' approach was

to give believers insight into the workings and intentions of God.

- ▶ God simply will not tolerate violence.
- ▶ Jesus' extended the command to love one's neighbor to include one's enemies. The command to love in Israel was intended for one Israelite neighbor toward another Israelite neighbor.
- ▶ Jesus extended the command to include the entire world.
- ▶ Every person is given equal status in God's kingdom.
- ▶ God loves all his children; God's love is inclusive.
- ▶ Disciples are living according to God's will when they follow Jesus' command to love—neighbor, stranger, the alien and one's enemy.
- ▶ The perfection God asks of his disciples is perfection that resides in true love that mirrors the love God has for each and every one of us.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example.

- ▶ What spoke to you the most in today's Gospel?
- ▶ Imagine that you have been terribly hurt by someone, can you fathom responding the way Jesus has asked us in this Gospel? What does it mean to you to respond the way Jesus challenges us to respond?
- ▶ How is the non-violent approach that Jesus presents in today's Gospel received in our world today? How is such an approach viewed? What are the implications for discipleship?
- ▶ For many it seems as though Jesus is asking us to be walked upon and used as a punching bag. After today's session and interpretation how would you respond to such an accusation?
- ▶ What are some ways that you can use this Gospel in your life right now? Are there any relationships that require you to be creative in your response to them?
- ▶ What does today's Gospel teach us about Jesus' relationship with us?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this Gospel?
- ▶ What are the present day implications of this Gospel?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97

Appendix

Today it is not uncommon to hear good Christian people clamoring for revenge, and crying for retaliation against one's enemies. I was at a dinner party once in which a man spewed such vitriolic hatred against Muslims and insisted he was very righteous in his hatred of them, that I wondered what Jesus must be thinking of such hatred coming from the mouth of a daily communicant.

It is so easy to embrace the pious exhortations of the Gospel; it is another thing to embrace the difficult, challenging sayings: LOVE YOUR ENEMIES. It is the most challenging exhortation of the Scripture. How do you forgive the rapist, the sexual abuser, the murderer, the aggressor in war? It must be possible or Jesus would not have asked it.

It took years for me to forgive a person who seriously hurt one of my children. I was filled with rage at the mere mention of his name. Yet I knew that unless and until I forgave him he would be my burden. I prayed for the strength to forgive and strength was given.

When we live by violence we often die by it. That same poor, troubled man could not face all that he had done and drove his car into a tree and killed himself. Initially I was glad. I eventually came to see that my happiness over his death was just as wrong and I had to repent of that as well.

Jesus knew what was required of us to make us good citizens of the kingdom he came to establish. Love is not a suggestion in his Gospel; it is a command. We/I will spend a lifetime growing in my ability to love as Jesus has asked me/us to love. Some days I am better at it than others. What he asks in this Gospel is extremely challenging but it is good for our souls. As such, it is good for me and I want to embrace it. I pray for the willingness to do so.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Church and Ecclesiology
Church Structure
Holy Orders
Morality

Moral Decision Making
Revelation I or II
Prayer
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CHURCH and ECCLESIOLOGY

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom and Matthew proclaimed Jesus. Jesus is setting forth the blueprint for living in the kingdom. The reign of God required leadership after Jesus was gone. Jesus cleverly prepares his disciples to assume that leadership. He sets forth the catechism to be emblazoned on their hearts—to be remembered for all time. He takes believers into the heart of God's intention for the Christian community. Paul sets forth an ecclesiology today—a theology of what it means to be called the people of God—to be called the CHURCH. It is thus a most appropriate occasion to focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY.

CHURCH STRUCTURE

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom and Matthew proclaimed Jesus. Jesus is setting forth the blueprint for living in the kingdom. The reign of God required leadership after Jesus was gone. Jesus cleverly prepares his disciples to assume that leadership. He sets forth the catechism to be emblazoned on their hearts—to be remembered for all time. He takes believers into the heart of God's intention for the Christian community. Jesus called the apostles and set in motion something that would have a legacy lasting over two thousand years—the CHURCH and its STRUCTURE. Today it is most fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about CHURCH STRUCTURE.

HOLY ORDERS

Paul preaches to the Corinthian community about what it means to be a Christian community. He reminds the people that the Spirit of God is in the community and dwells within each person. Paul's concern for his community rings through this reading. He reminds them that they are to follow their leader Christ. Human leaders are given to the community as servants. Human leaders respond to God's wisdom when they yield to the wisdom of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom and Matthew

proclaimed Jesus. Jesus is setting forth the blueprint for living in the kingdom. The reign of God required leadership after Jesus was gone. Jesus cleverly prepares his disciples to assume that leadership. He sets forth the catechism to be emblazoned on their hearts—to be remembered for all time. He takes believers into the heart of God's intention for the Christian community. Jesus called the apostles to lead the people after he departed from this world, the fruits of which we still experience today in the sacrament of Holy Orders. Today it is most fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the sacrament of HOLY ORDERS.

MORALITY

Leviticus calls people to be holy as God is holy. He challenges the moral behavior of the people. In order to live the moral life one is to embrace God's law of love. Jesus included one's enemies in that law. Jesus once again presents his catechism on how to live the moral life in the kingdom he came to establish. If we are to live the moral life we must understand the commitment we are making. It is thus important that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about morality.

MORAL DECISION MAKING

Leviticus calls people to be holy as God is holy. He challenges the moral behavior of the people. In order to live the moral life one is to embrace God's law of love. Jesus included one's enemies in that law. Jesus once again presents his catechism on how to live the moral life in the kingdom he came to establish. If we are to live the moral life we must understand the commitment we are making. How then do we know what is moral? How do we know how to make moral decisions? Today's doctrinal session will focus on what the Church teaches about MORAL DECISION MAKING.

REVELATION I or II

Every Sunday is an appropriate time to focus our attention on God's manifestation to the world through Sacred Scripture. Jesus' primary thesis is to preach the kingdom. Matthew's primary thesis is to preach Jesus—the revelation of God. Today Jesus continues his catechism on how to live a moral life in the kingdom he came to establish. He expresses God's will for those who would become his disciples. He reveals God's intention. Divine revelation is given to us to reveal God's intention for the human race. God speaks to us through his Word and reminds of us the God/human relationship since the beginning of time. Today's liturgy is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about REVELATION.

PRAYER

The heart of Jesus' message today is interior disposition. Jesus expects more than mere adherence to the law from his disciples. The only way disciples will be able to make that leap is through a life of prayer and intimate relationship with God in Christ. Today's liturgy therefore is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches us about PRAYER.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.